

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Decoding
Nuclear
Jargon

By Flora Lewis

PARIS, Nov. 25 — President Reagan and First Secretary Andropov have made parallel proclamations of continued interest in arms control, and parallel pledges in effect to continue the arms race. Each was trying simultaneously to appease a frightened world and to satisfy his own military-industrial complex.

It might be considered a fancy game, except that the "bargaining chips" are not symbolic. They are many billions of real dollars' worth of real missiles that can really end life as we know it in the real world.

Now it is time for real people to seize the issue. The notion has been spread that they can only deal with simplicities, and that decision must be left to experts to avoid the grave danger of illusion. This idea has been reinforced by the lush growth of jargon among nuclear strategists.

But it isn't impenetrable. The central reasoning is perverse but simple. The vast nuclear arsenals are supposed to deter war by making it clear that launching an attack will assure not victory but revenge to the aggressor. It is Orwellian to call the MX "Peacekeeper," and we are approaching 1984. The effort must be made to decode the jargon.

Perhaps the major element of confusion in the current debate is the difference between "first use" of nuclear weapons and "first strike," and the meaning of "vulnerability." They have precise definitions.

Of course, we are vulnerable to nuclear attack so long as a single atomic weapon exists. There is no defense, in the sense that an antitank weapon can stop a tank before it reaches its target. The strategic concept of "vulnerability," however, refers to the possibility of losing the certain capacity to hit back, after a "first strike."

"First strike" means a surprise, preemptive attack trying to establish tremendous nuclear superiority by wiping out a large proportion of the other side's arsenal so it can no longer offer a credible threat.

Some weapons are more usable for a "first strike" than others. Submarine-based missiles aren't considered to have the necessary accuracy to hit enemy silos. Nor are they "vulnerable" to a "first strike" because it's so hard to pinpoint subs.

Intermediate and long-range land-based missiles are the main culprits. The U.S. believes the big Soviet missiles, and for Europe the SS-20's, could deliver a "first strike." It therefore suspects the Soviets plan one because these arms make up most of their nuclear strength.

The MX might or might not survive, nobody can prove or disprove that. But with its accuracy and 10 warheads per missile, it could be used for a "first strike" against the Soviets.

Rep. Albert Gore has proposed a new bipartisan arms control offer, among other things limiting warheads to one per launcher, which would make a "first strike" incredible for either side. So far, the U.S. insists that the fact that it didn't strike the Soviet Union when it had vast superiority is assurance enough that it never will. Not surprisingly, the Russians prefer to rely on their own arsenal now that they have one.

A "first strike" is one way of starting a nuclear exchange, but not the only one. "No first use" means what it says, that the country making the promise will never be first to use any kind of nuclear weapon on any target even during war.

Leonid Brezhnev proclaimed last spring that this is now Soviet policy. U.S. officials did not take it seriously nor probe for details, since they have seen no change in Soviet deployments or procedures to convince them there is more to the pledge than propaganda.

Some allies and former U.S. officials think that is a mistake and that the question should be pursued.

NATO has always planned "first use." That is the meaning of its "sword and shield" symbol. The thesis is that while the Soviets have more conventional force, they can be deterred from using it by the threat of nuclear reprisal.

At first, in the 1950's, NATO planned "massive retaliation" because the U.S. only had big bombs and the Soviets couldn't match them. That is still French strategy, although the French arsenal is tiny compared to that of the superpowers. The French could never give up their plan of "first use" without giving up their claim to independent defense. (of us, non-nuc states)

Technology and President Kennedy changed NATO's doctrine from "massive retaliation" to "flexible response," a plan to use small nuclear weapons if early battles were lost, and threaten to "escalate" to bigger and bigger ones if the attack persisted.

Now, NATO's commander, Gen. Bernard Rogers, advocates a shift to "no early first use" by acquiring high technology (conventional) weapons, which could strike deep in enemy territory to prevent reinforcements. This would substitute for the plan to use short-range nuclear arms at the front. But it would cost a lot more, and the allies have shown little interest in this alternative to the plan for limited nuclear war in Europe.

There is a dilemma, but MX won't solve it. The first urgent need is to negotiate away fears of a "first strike," which could bring war by panicky miscalculation. The jargon shouldn't mask the fact that it is possible to brake the arms race without contemplating surrender.

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